THE ESTIMATE OF SHAKESPEARE, 1660-1733

by

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THE ESTIMATE OF SHAKESPEARE, 1660-1733

The neoclassic attitude toward Elizabethan poetry was that of an age of restrained maturity toward its lively and less decorous past--a past that was frequently thought of as an early stage in the development of England's poetic artistry. Belief in the progress of literature was widespread, and a corollary of that belief was that the literature of the past might be expected to be less perfect than modern work. As far as this goes, the resulting neoclassic censure of the Elizabethans for lack of form, polish, and adherence to the rules could have been expected, and no serious problems need have existed. Their negative criticism of the past is normal and understandable.

Reality, though, was much less considerate of the neoclassicists than this statement would indicate, for it gave them Shakespeare to contend with. In some respects, Shakespeare and neoclassic criticism of him fit the pattern well. R.W. Babcock, speaking of this early period in Shakespeare criticism, wrote that "the traditional objections to Shakespeare generally held sway. That is, the critics castigated the poet for neglecting the unities, for violating decorum by resorting to tragicomedy and supernatural characters, and for using puns and blank verse."[1]

But in other respects Shakespeare's work and the neoclassic reaction to it did not fit the pattern, and it will be part of the purpose of this report to show that Babcock's summary statement gives too one-sided an impression. Accepting the works of Shakespeare as great art must have been a difficult and confusing task for men who viewed emulation of the classics as the highest goal, and who wrote and judged with at least respectful attention to the rules.

This report is not about Shakespeare, but rather about the critical problems that his work posed for the Augustans. The conflict between their respect for formality and decorum and their admiration for a writer who was unruly and indecorous made many of the characteristics of the critics and their principles stand out in

sharp relief. In the investigation of these principles the Aristotelian dramatic categories of fable, diction, character, and thought will be the topics most frequently referred to, with occasional mention of comparisons of Shakespeare to Ben Jonson and to the ancients when the material affords opportunity. Necessity limits this discussion to Shakespeare's drama and particularly to tragedy because the bulk of neoclassic criticism was also thus limited. My aim is to present an accurate impression of the estimate of Shakespeare during the period; material concerned with a particular author or subject is intended to be faithfully indicative rather than exhaustive.

I

John Dryden was foremost among neoclassicists who believed that the language had been much refined since Shakespeare's time, and who felt that many of that poet's phrases were coarse or hardly intelligible, "and his whole style is so pestered with figurative expressions, that it is as affected as it is obscure."[2] His later plays, however, were thought by Dryden to be better in this respect.[3] Dryden frequently criticized Shakespeare's diction in this way, though when he did so he was careful to make known his liking for what lay beneath that diction. The failings in Shakespeare's representation of the passions did not, in his opinion, originate in his idea of the passions, but in his expression of them. Shakespeare could distinguish sublimity from a blown, puffy style, but what Dryden referred to (in the "Preface to Troilus," 1679) as "the fury of his fancy" sometimes destroyed his control over diction. In this matter of the thought that underlay Shakespeare's words, Dryden remarked that even if the embroidery of words were somehow to be burned away, the beauty of his thoughts would remain, "but I fear (at least let me fear it for myself) that we, who ape his sounding words, have nothing of his thought, but are all outside; there is not so much as a dwarf within our giant's clothes."[4] This set of attitudes indicates something of the ambivalence of the neoclassic feeling about Shakespeare. One gets the impression that many critics would have liked to express their estimate

of Shakespeare in the following way--had not Dryden done it first and thus ruined the opportunity: "Never did any author precipitate himself from such height of thought to so low expressions, as he often does. He is the very Janus of poets...."[5] Yet this should not be taken to imply a blanket condemnation of Shakespeare's diction. True, he sometimes swelled into bombast, but not often. He beautified the language by "graffing" on old words, and he bested the poets of Dryden's own time in diction, which he used to such great advantage in raising the power of the passions. This ambivalence illustrates not self-contradiction on Dryden's part, but what in his opinion was the lamentable unevenness of Shakespeare's control over diction. Neoclassic criticism of Shakespeare's plots is in some places inextricably entwined with the battle over the extent of his knowledge of the ancients, but Dryden kept his discussions of each relatively free of the other. He roundly objected to the plots of Pericles, Winter's Tale, Love's Labor Lost, and Measure for Measure because they "were either grounded on impossibilites, or at least so meanly written that the comedy part neither caused your mirth, nor the serious part your concernment."[6] Although Dryden permitted Lisideius to voice the opinion that the compression of time in history plays altered the perspective of nature and resulted in images less perfect than life, Dryden himself seems to have felt it less necessary to be faithful to history. He admitted that in the Duke of Guise he himself did not adhere to the letter of history, and violated the rules pertaining to place and time. He explained that "It was our common business here to draw the parallel of the times, and not to make an exact tragedy. For this once we were resolved to err with honest Shakespeare...."[7]

If Dryden's attitude toward Shakespeare's diction and plots is somewhat ambivalent and difficult to pin down, his admiration for the characters is unalloyed. The liar, the coward, the glutton, and the buffoon all united well in Falstaff; Henry IV was given the perfect manners of both king and father, and was a whole and consistent character. Even in Troilus, a play that Dryden thought bad enough to need extensive

rewriting, the characters of Pandarus and Thersites were thought promising, and the treatment of Cressida is censured not because of bad character invention, but because she is false and goes unpunished. Finally, while many other neoclassic critics condemned Shakespeare's use of supernatural characters, Dryden defended them as a legitimate conjunction of two or more real natures. Concerning the character of Caliban, he noted that although the effect is somewhat bold and, at first, intolerable, he is well furnished with language and manners that suit both his origin and his environment.

But probably the highest praise that Dryden could give Shakespeare was a favorable comparison with both ancients and moderns. I have already mentioned Dryden's opinion that Shakespeare excelled the moderns in diction and his fear that his own thoughts and those of his contemporaries were but dwarfs by comparison with Shakespeare's giants. In the Discourse of Satire (1693) he delivered another part of the evaluation when he stated bluntly that, in tragedy, Shakespeare excelled the ancients. Dryden was not unaware of his position as literary dictator of England, and the next logical step was a comparison of his own works with those of Shakespeare. The result might be regarded as the beginning of the establishment of Shakespeare as a public standard of excellence. Dryden justified his own use of sound effects by Shakespeare's use of them, and in the preface to Troilus he remarked that those who thought that the concluding scene of the third act was an imitation of one between Brutus and Cassius "do me an honor by supposing I could imitate the incomparable Shakespeare...."[8]

Comparing Shakespeare to Ben Jonson is a critical exercise that, it seems, has always been popular, but among the volumes of work on the subject, no conclusion about the relationship between these two is more memorable than that put into the mouth of Neander. It needs no explanation.

> If I would compare him [Jonson] with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him the more correct poet, but Shakespeare the greater wit. Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate

writing; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare.[9]

Thus Dryden's estimate of Shakespeare was both favorable and unfavorable, and as shall be seen, in this he was typical rather than atypical of his time. But there was at least one critic of the late seventeenth century whose opinion was not mixed, whose criticism of Shakespeare was as one-sided as Babcock's statement.

Thomas Rymer's criticism of Shakespeare in A Short View of Tragedy (1693) may be accorded the dubious honor of being the most resounding condemnation of him in the literature. In Othello, the major topic of discussion, Rymer expected consistent, historically true characters, restrained diction (unless the situation warranted extravagance), nobility of thought, plot elements following one another from necessity, moral instruction, evidence of manners and good breeding on the part of the author, and one assumes, many other things that he quite evidently did not feel were there at all. His rage at not finding them produced criticism as vituperative and violent as it was perceptive.

In his discussion of the necessity for action in a tragedy, Rymer went so far as to state that in Othello (special reference is made to I.i.75-8 and II.i.66-73) the words are (1) an impediment or detraction from the essential action or (2) a kind of bombast that does not belong in any play: "Once in a man's life he might be content at Bedlam to hear such a rapture."[10] This verse rumbling in our ears should be of good use to help the action, but he deemed the expression deserving of little treatment, since there is neither sense nor meaning behind it. Specifically criticized was Act I, in which Othello takes 19 lines of preamble to tell the Venetian nobles that he wants words to plead his case.

If the details of Shakespeare's diction in Othello were given little more than a passing and contemptuous word, Rymer warmed to his task when he came to deal with plot and character. Shakespeare altered the story of Othello, but always, Rymer felt, for the worse. He gave the Moor a name and "a note of pre-eminence" which

history does not admit of. Also improbably raised in position was the Moor's wife. Here Rymer seems not to be arguing against the change from the original, but rather contending that the positions of Othello and Desdemona are improbable in any historically true situation. In a critical context that mixes consideration of plot and character, Rymer complains of many such improbabilities: it is unlikely that a maiden would be won by Othello's stories of his life's adventures; Othello is a general, but we see nothing in his character to justify his occupation of the office; Iago is put before us as a soldier, but he has none of the open-hearted and plain characteristics one expects of soldiers; the soldiers speak like bureaucrats, not like the blunt men they should be; finally Rymer asks, "of what flesh and blood does our Poet make these noble Venetians? The men without Gall; the Women without either Brains or Sense?"[11] Not only are the characters unnatural in any historical sense, they are not fit to be seen in a tragedy. Othello is no tragic hero, but a jealous booby. Iago is plainly Shakespeare's knave, and Desdemona his fool, because on her wedding night she unceasingly pleads Cassio's case before her husband. Plainly, great thoughts are not to be expected from such a cast of incompetents. Yet all would not be lost, presumably, if only some lesson could be learned from the events of the play. But on this subject he soon broke into sarcasm, suggesting that the play <u>does</u> teach three moral lessons: (1) maidens should not run off with Moors, (2) wives should look well after their linen, and (3) "This may be a lesson to Husbands that before their Jealousie be Tragical, the proofs may be mathematical."[12] Despite the attempt at humor, Rymer is deeply troubled by Desdemona's fruitless death: "If this be our end, what boots it to be Vertuous?"[13] His authority for the validity of this complaint is claimed to be none other than Aristotle, who, according to Rymer, tells us that poetry is "more general and abstracted, is led more by the Philosophy, the reason and nature of things, than History: which only records things higlety, piglety, right or wrong as they happen."[14] Shakespeare should, then, have been guided more by corrected nature

and philosophy, instead of by unorganized reality, which led him to write of unnatural acts and consequences no less than of ordinary ones. Instead of experiencing the desired purgation or instruction, Rymer felt, the audience walked out of the theater with a collection of disordered thoughts, addled brains, perverted affections, and corrupted appetites.

Rymer's anger at not finding in Othello what he thought he had a right to expect is nowhere more evident than in his parting blast:

> There is in this play, some burlesk, some humour, and ramble of Comical Wit, some shew and some Mimickry to divert the spectators: but the tragical part is plainly none other, than a Bloody Farce, without salt or savor.[15]

One would think that by the time Rymer had finished dealing with Othello in this manner his spleen would have been satisfied. Not so, however. The treatment of Julius Caesar that followed was brief by comparison and his complaints were similar, but one passage is worth singling out because of the direct reference to a need for rules of restraint:

> Shakespeare's genius lay for Comedy and Humor. In Tragedy he appears quite out of his element; his Brains are turn'd, he raves and rambles, without any coherence, or any rule to control him, or set bounds to his Phrenzy.[16]

Babcock certainly had this variety of criticism in mind when he described the tendencies of this early period of Shakespearean criticism.[17] But as will appear, Dryden's opinions were far more typical of the time; in a letter to Dennis (1694) he stated his belief that modern tragedy and comedy were far beyond anything of the ancients, and went on to say that

> Shakespeare had a genius for it [tragedy]; and we know, in spite of Mr. Rymer, that genius alone is a greater virtue (if I may so call it) than all other qualifications put together. You see what success this learned critick has found in the world, after his blaspheming Shakespeare. Almost all the faults which he has discover'd are truly there; yet who will read Mr. Rymer or not read Shakespeare? For my own part I reverence Mr. Rymer's learning, but I detest his ill nature and his arrogance.[18]

Thus the locus of the inaccuracy in Babcock's statement is becoming evident. Dryden, too, saw these faults, but he still found much more to admire than dislike

in Shakespeare--as did nearly every critic of consequence except Thomas Rymer.

Part of Rymer's criticism of Shakespeare was censure from a moral point of view, but Shakespeare did not have the reputation of an unalterably and consistently amoral writer--much less an immoral one. The following excerpt from Jeremy Collier's Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage (1669) is of value not because of its contribution to Shakespearean criticism,[19] but because its author uses Shakespeare's work as an example of moral writing:

> I shall take a Testimony or two from Shakespear. And here we may observe the the admir'd Falstaffe goes off in Disappointment. He is thrown out of favor as being a Rake, and dies like a Rat behind the Hangings. The Pleasure he had given, would not excuse him. The Poet was not so partial, as to let his humour compound for his Lewdness.[20]

Whatever Collier's error may say about how carefully he had read Shakespeare, he had evidently read enough to find a distinctly moral part. Yet it would have been much easier to find examples of amorality.[21] Collier was apparently either more than willing to think well of a poet who was becoming a standard of excellence, or he was eager to suggest that such good poets necessarily wrote moral plays.

Nicholas Rowe, in the introduction to his edition (1709) of Shakespeare's plays, agreed with Dryden that most of the faults pointed out by Rymer were faults indeed, but he expressed a wish that Rymer had also observed some of the beauties, for the treatment that resulted was, he felt, poorly balanced. Perhaps, he suggested, Rymer was trying to show off his own knowledge of poetry. Rowe's criticism of Rymer's vanity and critical precepts is brief and not specific, but he did say that "If the Fable and Incidents are not to his taste, yet the Thoughts are almost everywhere noble, and the diction manly and proper."[22] Shakespeare was, he felt, frequently careless in the construction of his plots, but even this is only reluctantly admitted. No exception, it seemed, could be taken to his diction or the historical accuracy and fitness of his characters. Interestingly enough, those faults which Rowe did admit were in his opinion excused by Shakespeare's lack of knowledge of the ancients.

That unfortunate ignorance caused some errors Rowe allowed, yet he excused Shakespeare by saying that "it would be hard to judge him by a law he knew nothing of."[23] Furthermore, though knowledge of the ancients might have brought correctness, "it is not improbable but that the regularity and deference for them, which would have attended that correctness, might have restrain'd some of that fire, impetuosity, and even beautiful extravagance which we admire in Shakespear...."[24] Rowe highly valued this untrained impetuosity. The Tempest seems to have been his favorite among Shakespeare's plays largely because of the freedom that the author gave to his imagination in writing it--but still the neoclassic critic, he could not forbear observing that the unities are kept more strictly in this play than in the others. Davenant and Dryden, he believed, ought not to have left parts of the play out.

Rowe seemed not to want to blame Shakespeare for anything that could reasonably be placed on other shoulders. He observed, as Alexander Pope did later, that tragicomedy and punning were common vices of the age. Tragicomedy was, after all, coming to be liked by the English better than pure tragedy, and even punning might not be "thought too light for the stage."[25]

Again like Dryden, Rowe compared Shakespeare favorably to the ancients and to Ben Jonson. He quoted a favorite passage:

> She never told her love,
> But let concealment, like a worm i' th' bud
> Feed on her damask cheek; She pin'd in thought,
> And sate like Patience on a monument
> Smiling at Grief.[26]

This, he believed, was a sketch that even the ancient masters would have been hard put to equal.

His comparison of Shakespeare with Jonson was a less fervent, less artistic but equally sincere version of the words of Neander:

> Jonson was certainly a very good scholar, and in that had the advantage of Shakespear; tho' at the same time I believe it must be allow'd, that what Nature gave the latter, was more than a balance for what Books had given the former....[27]

Shakespeare's evident lack of knowledge of the ancients was an even more crucial

fact to John Dennis than it was to Nicholas Rowe. Generally, Dennis seemed to appreciate Rowe's point about the value of untrained genius, but disagreed in that he felt that the infusion of learning into Shakespeare would have improved the works. In the first of a series of letters (1711) evaluating Shakespeare for the benefit of his correspondent he began by praising the poet's natural genius for tragedy--which he believed to be the greatest the world had seen. But he further wrote that Shakespeare "seems to have wanted nothing but Time and Leisure for Thought, to have found out those rules of which he appears so ignorant. His Characters are always drawn justly, exactly, graphically, except where he fail'd by not knowing History or the Poetical Art."[28] He was also a master of the use of terror, and would have surpassed the ancients there if he had had the advantage of art and learning, but without these he made great mistakes in drawing characters taken from history. Here Dennis refers specifically to Menenius, drawn as a Roman senator and a buffoon--in Dennis' eyes, two mutually contradictory characterizations.

He briefly praised Shakespeare's expression and the sentiments of the characters, but he was careful to let it be known that his remarks did not apply to all the plays.

Dennis was far more persuaded of a need for poetic justice in drama than either Dryden or Rowe, for like Rymer he demanded moral instruction:

> The Good must never fail to prosper, and the Bad must always be punish'd: Otherwise the Incidents, and particularly the Catastrophe which is the Grand Incident, are liable to be imputed rather to Chance than to Almighty Concuct and to Sovereign Justice.[29]

Therefore Dennis felt that Coriolanus should die, but by due process of law, not at the hands of murderous ruffians. It was because of this and other moral infractions in Coriolanus that Dennis felt obliged to alter the play. Nor was this the only play that deserved censure from this point of view; Shakespeare was also deficient in administering poetic justice in Macbeth, Othello, King Lear, Julius Caesar, and Hamlet. Although he did not say that Shakespeare ought not to be read

because of it, this lack of moral responsibility was, as far as Dennis was concerned, one of the poet's most serious faults.

Dennis' estimate of Shakespeare was not unlike Dryden's, for it was a mixed evaluation covering critical points that were discussed repeatedly by other writers of the period: Shakespeare had been regrettably unlettered, and this resulted in historical inaccuracy, but he had also been blessed with the natural genius that made him a master of terror and tragedy, and an excellent creator of characters. Not directly related to Shakespeare's lack of learning was his worst characteristic--the absence of a writer's due sense of moral responsibility.

Another critic who considered the lack of poetic justice as one of the vices of the stage was Richard Steele, and in a discussion (in one of the Town-Talk letters, 1716) of new requirements limiting these vices he used Hamlet as an example. Here he is less closely related to John Dennis than to Jeremy Collier, for in his eyes the play contains "innumerable Incidents which strongly strike the Mind of the Spectator, with Messages of Horrour, Revenge upon unjust Actions undertaken from Ambition, with many other laudable circumstances...."[30] There is here more than a little of the use of Shakespeare as a standard of excellence--and this, as with Jeremy Collier, in an area in which it would have been easier to use Shakespeare as a bad example.

But to use Shakespeare as a bad example of anything was evidently far from Steele's mind; he either thought that the faults were not worth mentioning, or, more likely, felt that they had already received mention enough. He was impressed with Shakespeare's understanding of and use of metaphors such as the "dogs of war" referred to in the prologue to Henry V and in Julius Caesar (III.i.273). The poet, he felt, handled scenes of madness well by depicting noble minds in an abnormal state; the result being less like pitiful insanity than "that grief which we have for the Decease of our Friends...."[31] With reference to the dark horror of the witchcraft material in Macbeth, he observed that "Subjects of this kind, which are in themselves disa-

greeable, can at no time become entertaining, but by passing thro' an Imagination like Shakespeare's to form them; for which reason Mr. Dryden wou'd not allow even Beaumont and Fletcher capable of Imitating him."[32] He found it impossible to turn from Shakespeare's characters without "strong impressions of honour and humanity,"[33] and reading a scene from one of the plays (Henry IV I.i.) convinced him that anyone who successfully represents great men and their concerns must have a soul as noble as those described. Nor was it necessary for Shakespeare to resort to the show and pomp of such devices as processions or captive princes in order to show the greatness of his characters; "he rather presents that great soul [Caesar] debating upon the subject of life and death with his intimate friends...."[34] To illustrate his point, Steele quotes from Julius Caesar (II.ii.) the lines spoken by Caesar that begin: "Cowards die many times before their deaths,/ The valiant never taste of death but once."

Steele was not alone in this last judgment, for two years later[35] Joseph Addison voiced the same conclusion, using as his example Brutus instead of Caesar. Yet Addison's estimate of Shakespeare differed from that of Steele in at least one particular. Although he might have admired the rhetorical force evident in Shakespeare's use of the "dogs of war" metaphor just as Steele did, he observed that the poet too often affected greatness, and in the necessary deviation from common forms and phrases became stiff and unnatural, falling into a sort of false sublime. In a discussion of this as a problem with which all writers must cope, he noted "that when our thoughts are great and just, they are often obscured by the sounding Phrases, hard Metaphors, and forced expressions in which they are cloathed. Shakespear is often very faulty in this Particular."[36] Punning, another persistent problem in Shakespeare's diction, was admitted by Addison to have been popular in the time of James I, but he still referred to it as false wit, indicating that he was less inclined to approve the practice than Rowe had been.

Where Steele had limited his commentary on the character to praise of the noble types, Addison went a step farther out on a limb to talk of the imaginary beings of the plays. He believed that the English were best in writing of such creatures because they were, of all things, "naturally fanciful." And in this kind of endeavor "Among the English, Shakespear has incomparably excelled all others. That noble Extravagance of Fancy, which he had in so great Perfection, thoroughly qualified him to touch this weak superstitious Part of his Reader's Imagination: and made him capable of succeeding, where he had nothing to support him save the Strength of his own Genius."[37] Addison's specific examples in this passage are the speeches of the witches in Macbeth, which seemed to him so wild and solemn that we believe that if such beings did exist, they would talk and act as they are seen in Shakespeare. Similarly, it was Addison's opinion that Shakespeare showed greater genius in drawing the character of Caliban than that of Hotspur of Julius Caesar; "The one was to be supplied out of his own Imagination, whereas the other might have been formed upon Tradition, History, and Observation."[38] Addison expressed a liking for other imaginary characters as well as Shakespeare's; Sin and Death in Paradise Lost drew his praise as products of the imagination, but he thought them too improbable to be proper actors in an epic. Perhaps he would have voiced the same conclusion had Shakespeare's characters appeared in an epic, for throughout his criticism he was strongly conscious of the demands of genre.

Note that again a part of the favorable judgment has stemmed from the unlettered nature of Shakespeare's genius. For Addison, Shakespeare was rather a poet of "Force and Spirit" than of "scrupulous Nicety and Exactness." The connotations of these descriptive terms permitted Addison to honor Shakespeare at the same time that he recognized what in some circles (especially Rymer's) would have been seen as a vice rather than a virtue. Addison's fullest pronouncement on this matter is strongly reminiscent of Dryden's comment on Rymer. Speaking of critics who attend too closely

to the dramatic rules, Addison wrote:

> Our inimitable Shakespear is a Stumbling-block to the whole Tribe of these rigid Criticks. Who would not rather read one of his Plays, where there is not a single rule of the Stage observed, than any Production of a modern Critick, where there is not one of them violated? Shakespear was indeed born with all the Seeds of Poetry, and may be compared to the Stone in Pyrrhus's Ring, which, as Pliny tells, had the figure of Apollo and the Nine Muses in the Veins of it, produced by the spontaneous Hand of Nature, without any Help from Art.[39]

The name of Charles Gildon has so often been associated with that of Thomas Rymer in the matter of Shakespearean criticism[40] that it should surprise no one to find Gildon taking Rymer's side in the Rymer-Dryden matter. He was puzzled by Dryden's answer to Rymer's Short View of Tragedy; it seemed to him to be an admission that Rymer was right. If so, this admission was in fact "a greater proof of the folly, and abandon'd taste of the town, than any imperfection in the critic, since the charge Mr. Rymer brings against these plays is, that they have no Fable, and by consequence can give no instruction; that their manners and sentiments, to say nothing of the diction, are everywhere defective, and therefore can give no rational or useful pleasure."[41] Yet according to Gildon, Shakespeare was not entirely to blame for the faults of his work. The poet was one of those moderns who had to rely on strong imagination because they were born into ignorant times and had not the advantage of learning and art. Shakespeare was thus deprived of the arts that could have polished his rough genius and permitted him to attain the perfection seen in the ancients. In The Complete Art of Poetry (1718), Gildon agreed with John Dennis on the question of whether a knowledge of the rules would have helped the poet: "Shakespear is great in nothing, but what is according to the rules of art...."[42] Elsewhere, he said, appear absurdities such that only the high excellence of other parts persuade us to accept the work as a whole. Gildon was aware of the critical contention that a knowledge of the rules of art would have spoiled the natural talent that was so highly valued in Shakespeare, but he strongly disagreed, writing that "a due Observation of natural Rules, that is, a strict Attendance to the Rules of Nature and

Reason, can never embarrass or clogg an Author's Fancy, but rather enlarge and extend it."[43]

Among all Shakespeare's faults, Gildon felt, the worst were unquestionably the soliloquies, of which "there is not one in all his works that can be excus'd by nature or reason."[44]

But these are not blanket condemnations of Shakespeare's work. Gildon approached his author with an odd mixture of mild surprise at his own presumption and sincere conviction that here there was a critical task that needed doing. In the accomplishment of this task, Gildon occasionally spoke in praise of Shakespeare. In particular, he admired the distinctive dialogue of the plays, expressing his opinion that it would be possible to distinguish between Brutus and Cassius without taking notice of the names attached to their speeches. This effect, he felt, resulted principally from Shakespeare's control over the diction of dialogue. He paid what may be his highest compliment to Shakespeare when he observed that an author's true wit is one of those qualities not subject to the effects of time. In this he granted Shakespeare a just place beside the ancients:

> As we find this beyond Dispute in Shakespear, so the same will hold good of those great Masters of Poetry among the Antients of Rome, and Athens; who have in all Times, and in all Nations (as soon as understood) kept up, nay encreas'd their Esteem, and Value, whilst every thing else chang'd: Imperial Families, Kingdoms, whole Nations, and People have perish'd or alter'd their Modes, Forms, and Languages.[45]

Much of Gildon's criticism centered on Shakespeare's lack of learning and lack of knowledge of the rules of art. Thus Shakespeare was not blamable for the absence of fable and instruction or for the defective manners, sentiments, and diction of his plays. Nevertheless, they were there to be criticized and compared with the admirable qualities seen in the poet's characters and wit. But Gildon was not the first critic to make critical use of Shakespeare's small learning--nor was he the last. Alexander Pope was yet another.

To a student familiar with the writing of Pope, the preface to his edition of Shakespeare (1725) is a surprise and a disappointment. Much of the preface, despite the initial remarks of approbation, is concerned with excuses for the faults of the plays. Although Pope remarked that the beauties are as conspicuous and as numerous as the faults, the emphasis remained on the latter.

Pope began by praising his author's originality and affinity with nature and comparing him favorably with Homer in this respect. Shakespeare was more an instrument than an imitator of nature, and "His Characters are so much Nature her self, that 'tis a sort of injury to call them by so distant a name as Copies of her."[46] These characters are so individually drawn and their speeches are so fitting that if the speeches were printed without the names attached it would still be possible to apply them to the correct characters. (This may have been a commonplace among theater-goers; Gildon, of course, had made much the same remark.) Shakespeare possessed an unparalleled power over our passions; without apparent preparation, we find ourselves emotionally stirred at just the right moment. Sorrow, pity, laughter, and anger are equally at his command. Not only in passion, but also in reasoning "he seems to have known the world by Intuition, to have look'd thro' human nature at one glance, and to be the only Author that gives ground for a very new opinion, that the Philosopher and even the Man of the world, may be Born, as well as the Poet."[47] Thus ended Pope's brief panegyric.

The reverse side of this coin turned up when Pope agreed with Dryden in one respect, writing that "It must be own'd that with all these great excellencies he has almost as great defects; and that as he has certainly written better, so he has perhaps written worse, than any other."[48] Pope felt that some of these faults were placed unjustly on the poet's shoulders since he was by necessity compelled to level his work at the populace. Thus the comedies (which depend much upon buffoonery, ribaldry, and unmannerly jests) are set among tradesmen, historical plays follow vulgar tradi-

tions, and the surprise and admiration in the tragedies often result from strange and unnatural incidents, exaggerated thoughts, verbose and bombastic expressions, pompous rhymes, and thundering versification.

> To judge therefore of Shakespear by Aristotle's rules, is like trying a man by the Laws of one Country, who acted under those of another. He writ to the People; and writ at first without patronage of the better sort, and therefore without aims of pleasing them: without assistance or advice from the Learned, as without the advantage of education or acquaintance among them; without that knowledge of the best models, the Ancients, to inspire him with an emulation of them.[49]

Not only did Shakespeare have to please the lower classes, but the same necessity forced him to keep bad artistic company--the players who "are just such judges of what is right as Taylors are of what is graceful."[50] In the matter of the extent of Shakespeare's knowledge, Pope's contention was that if Shakespeare was not learned, he was at least widely read. Unlike Dennis, Pope was quite satisfied with the historical accuracy of the customs, rites, and manners of the Romans as seen, for example, in Coriolanus and Julius Caesar. Whenever Shakespeare spoke on a subject he showed competent if not extensive knowledge. Such blunders as Hector quoting the not-yet-alive Aristotle must surely have been publisher's mistakes, since the presence of these elemental errors is inconsistent with what Pope assumed to be the admitted fact of the poet's wide reading and competent knowledge.

Pope's final evaluation was a favorable comparison of Shakespeare with Pope's own contemporaries. Shakespeare was strong and solemn where the others were elegant and glaring. As a part of this comparison Pope wrote of Shakespeare's works as a piece of Gothic architecture to be compared with the neat modern buildings of his own contemporaries, saying that the Gothic structure "has much the greater variety, and much the nobler apartments; tho' we are often conducted to them by dark, odd, and uncouth passages. Nor does the Whole fail to strike us with greater reverence tho' many of the Parts are childish, ill-plac'd and unequal to its grandeur."[51]

Pope published his edition of Shakespeare in 1725. In 1726 Lewis Theobald

countered with Shakespeare Restored: or a Specimen of the Many Errors as well Committed as Unamended by Mr. Pope.... As might be concluded on the evidence of the title alone, Theobald was one of those who was disappointed with Pope's edition of Shakespeare. It was not the critical evaluation or the attempted blame-shifting in the preface that disturbed him, but rather the fact that Pope had either induced errors or permitted them to remain in the text of the plays:

> Shakespeare's Works have always appear'd to me like what he makes his Hamlet compare the World to, an unweeded garden grown to seed: And I am sorry there is still reason to complain, the Weeds in him are so sparingly thin'd, that, not to speak out of compass, a thousand rank and unsightly one are left to stare us in the Face, and clog the Delight of the expected Prospect.[52]

Theobald voiced his respect for Pope and his unwillingness to do justice to Shakespeare at Pope's expense, but this seems to be only lip service paid to an illustrious contemporary, for however he tried to soften his remarks, it is evident that he believed that Pope's job of editing was a poor one. What Pope spoke of as his own "religious abhorrence of all innovation" in reproducing the text was for Theobald "downright superstition." He believed it the duty of an editor to be his author's protector, to restore corrupt and senseless passages, and to make reasonable emendations where necessary. Theobald felt that these were jobs that Pope either avoided or did poorly.

The kind of textual reconstruction he referred to is shown in what has become a well known problem associated with a line in Henry V describing the death of Falstaff.[53] The corrupt text read "His nose was as sharp as a pen, and a table of green fields." But tables and green fields have nothing to do with each other, nor does the combination make sense in context. Pope suggested that this part crept into the text from a marginal stage direction--a table was to be brought in, and the property-man's name was Greenfield. He accordingly left that part out of his corrected text. But Theobald denied that it was ever customary to mention the property-man's name. Even more damaging to Pope's reading was his observation that such directions would be put at the beginning of the scene. Theobald, having before him a text with a marginal sug-

gestion that "tabled" should read "talked," went one step farther and corrected the whole to read "His Nose was as sharp as a Pen, and a' babled of green fields." His reading has been accepted as the probably correct one. But this is easily the happiest and most famous of Theobald's emendations. More typical in scope is a one-word emendation dealing with a passage in Hamlet (I.v.11). The Ghost of Hamlet's father describes himself and his state in these words:

> I am thy father's spirit;
> Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
> And for the day, confin'd to fast in fires;
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
> Are burnt and purg'd away.

Though all of his copies concurred in this reading, Theobald thought it strange that fasting should be part of the punishment for a ghost who requires no sustenance, and suggested that the spirit should be roasting instead. This, he believed, would be more of a punishment, would conform with notions of purgatory and would better fit the sense of the last line of the passage. To support his suggestion, he cited a similar use of roasted later in the same play and a parallel usage of bathe in Measure for Measure.

Yet fast may be read as a metaphor indicating penance of any kind, and adding roast to a description of one already understood to exist in fires adds little but redundance. Modern editions retain the old reading. This is the pattern of Shakespeare Restored, in which Theobald brought patience and a respectable amount of knowledge about Elizabethan theater to bear on some of the textual problems of Shakespeare's plays.

George Sherburn has observed that although many of Theobald's corrections of Pope's edition have been accepted (some few by Pope himself), just as many were either wrong or not worth the trouble. Pope, of course, had stronger feelings on the matter, for despite Theobald's express wish not to detract from Pope's merit he had unavoidably done so, and in return Pope pilloried him as the Prince of Dulness

in the 1728 Dunciad. But perhaps Theobald deserved better, having made a significant contribution to Shakespearean criticism in the form of a serious and concentrated effort at establishing a reliable text.

In the preface to his edition of Shakespeare (1733), Theobald took time out from textual criticism to offer his own general estimate of his author.[55] He was in fundamental agreement with other neoclassic critics who found both grandeur and carelessness in the poet's work. He even agreed with Pope that some of the faults could be safely imputed to the vices of the times: "His Clinches, false Wit, and descending beneath himself, seem to be Deference paid to the then reigning Barbarism."[56] His author's diction, imagery, ideas, and characters (particularly the latter) were highly praised. Although Theobald admitted that Shakespeare had but little education to lend art (here in the sense of artifice) to his pen, he somewhat contradictorily asserted that "Whether we respect the Force and Greatness of his Genius, the Extent of his Knowledge and Reading, the Power and Address with which he throws out and applies either Nature, or Learning, there is ample scope both for our Wonder and Pleasure."[57]

Nicholas Rowe had once suggested that if Shakespeare had read the ancients, passages and images from them would have crept into his writings, but he found no such evidence, and concluded that Shakespeare was not familiar with ancient authors. Theobald, on the other hand, did note places in the text where Shakespeare's constructions or phrasing paralleled that of an ancient, and suggested that if Shakespeare was not here imitating an ancient author, he had independently achieved the same result.

Nor could Theobald resist the opportunity to make a remark about Rymer: "Some Censurers of Shakespeare, and particularly Mr. Rymer, have taught me to distinguish betwixt the Railer and Critick."[58] Theobald contended that Rymer's invective only indicated his own madness, and he attached Charles Gildon to Rymer because of similar habits of thought; they were both more concerned with finding fault and showing their own critical prowess than in improving the understanding of the literature. They

were, he thought, "the hypercritical Part of the Science of Criticism."[59]

II

But this set of opinions by professional and semi-professional literary men is only one kind of estimate; another is the popular estimate. Gerald Bentley's Shakespeare and Jonson is a comparative survey of the seventeenth-century reputations of these two men on the basis of written allusions to their works. Since all available written allusions are used by Bentley as evidence, his survey is neither so selective as I have thus far been, nor so all-inclusive as the term "popular" would seem to indicate. His survey is of the actively literate population of England. After dividing the allusions into classes and decades, he concludes that "Jonson's general popularity was greater than Shakespeare's from the beginning of the century to 1690; Shakespeare's reputation was growing more rapidly than Jonson's in the last two decades."[60] The one class of allusions that shows a markedly different trend is that concerned with the characters, in which Shakespeare's reputation overshadowed that of Jonson even early in the century. Bentley believes that his evidence, as far as it goes, may lead us to underestimate Jonson's reputation because the time spent in searching for allusions to Shakespeare has far exceeded that spent in searching for allusions to Jonson, and presumably a higher percentage of extant allusions to Shakespeare has been found. His point is well taken.

Information supplied by The London Stage about the frequency of theatrical productions provides another measure of popularity. For example, a comparison of Macbeth and Othello, two of the most popular Shakespeare plays, with The Silent Woman and Volpone, the two most popular Jonson plays, suggests that theatrical productions of Shakespeare's plays were twice as numerous as those of Jonson in the period 1660-1700.[61] This argues against Bentley's main point about Jonson's early popularity, but the contradiction may be due merely to incomplete information about Restoration

productions. Since the kind of allusions used by Bentley were also used as a source of information in compiling The London Stage, his contention about a higher percentage of Shakespeare allusions being found is relevant here. Such a higher percentage of allusions may have overbalanced the frequency of production records in Shakespeare's favor.[62]

Information from The London Stage[63] about productions after 1700 leads to a conclusion more in line with Bentley's. In the first decade of the eighteenth century Shakespeare's plays were presented a little more frequently than Jonson's. In the second decade Shakespeare's popularity took an enormous jump, while Jonson's actually fell. In the period 1721-1729 Jonson's plays regained lost ground, but they were still not so frequently presented as those of his contemporary. The change of public opinion was clearly in Shakespeare's favor.

Another source of information about the popular estimate in this period is the personal diary. John Evelyn wrote little about Shakespeare, but Samuel Pepys' entries make frequent references to the plays and to his own opinions of them. As one might expect, he was no more limited to a single attitude in his estimate of Shakespeare than the critics we have already reviewed. Twelfth Night, The Taming of the Shrew, Romeo and Juliet, and Midsummer's Night's Dream he described as weak, silly, or insipid. The history plays were thought good but not great, as were Hamlet, Macbeth, and Othello. But none of these plays (not even The Tempest, which he saw in the Davenant-Dryden adaptation) won as much praise from Pepys as did Jonson's The Silent Woman, which drew him to the theater often. Thus Pepys' Diary helps to verify Bentley's conclusions if, as seems likely, his opinions may be taken to reflect those of Restoration London.

Thus the popular reputation of Shakespeare's plays presents a fairly clear picture: a substantial standing during the early and middle decades of the seventeenth century, but one less high than that of Jonson and a few momentarily fashionable

dramatists. During the last two decades of the century Shakespeare rapidly gained popularity, and at the beginning of the eighteenth century held a small but increasing lead over Jonson, the only real competitor whose plays had also stood the test of the century's theatrical seasons.

The opinions of the literary critics selected, however, show no such plan. Perhaps their number is too small to show such a development if one did exist. But it is still possible to summarize those aspects of the critical estimate that were expressed a number of times. Most of the critics of this period disliked the plots, and less frequently the diction of the plays. They censured the plots for being "grounded on impossibilities," for depending on unnatural incidents, and for historical inaccuracy. The diction they found bombastic or low; too often it was spoiled by an unjustified extravagance in the selection of words, or it slipped into low expressions that were either out of place in a noble context or disturbing to polite society.

On the other hand, they almost unanimously joined in admiring Shakespeare's thoughts and characters. They most commonly praised the thoughts for nobility, but I assume that in order to be so praised the thoughts first had to fulfill minimal requirements for suitability within the situation in which they appear. But of all the subjects touched on by the critics, they plainly thought most highly of the characters; the actions and words of Shakespeare's people were consistent with nature (supernatural characters excepted), with themselves, and with the situations into which they were placed. In this last the critics were in full agreement with that part of the popular estimate measured by Bentley, though there is some disagreement on the relative merits of Shakespeare and Jonson.

The one common feature of the Restoration and early eighteenth-century critical estimate of Shakespeare is ambivalence. All of these critics, from Dryden to Pope, from Rymer to Gildon, believed that Shakespeare had been born into an age less

poetically advanced than their own. Some--but not all--felt that this had been a great misfortune, for it had kept him from fulfilling his potential. He was unpolished and they knew it, for Rymer had pointed this out in a most painful manner, and none, not even Dryden, could deny that Rymer had been right as far as he had gone. Yet in the eyes of most of them, the nobility of Shakespeare's thoughts and the truth of his characters were so imposing that the total effect of one of his plays was, more often than not, superior to the ancients'. He was, as Dryden said, "the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul."[64] He broke dramatic rules, mixed trivia with grandeur, offended moral sensitivity, presented nature unkempt rather than methodized, and violated the laws of probability. Yet the same critics who noted and condemned these faults raised Shakespeare to a standard of excellence, and they thought so highly of his work as to initiate historical and textual studies that they might understand it better.

Taking into consideration the now acknowledged fact of Shakespeare's excellence, Babcock's statement about this early period of Shakespearean criticism may be taken to imply that the critical principles then in use were inadequate. Perhaps the neoclassic ambivalence about Shakespeare strained the reigning principles of criticism, but never to the breaking point. In general, Shakespeare received praise or censure when, in the opinion of the critic, his work either did or did not conform to those principles--though now and then they willingly acknowledged in his work flights beyond the reach of art or criticism. The criticisms mentioned by Babcock were leveled at Shakespeare's plays, and they were thought to be significant criticisms-- but they did not, as Babcock would have it, "hold sway."

NOTES

[1] The Genesis of Shakespeare Idolatry (Chapel Hill, 1931), p. 3.

[2] "Preface to Troilus and Cressida," The Works of John Dryden, ed. Walter Scott and George Saintsbury (London, 1892), VI, 225. This edition is hereafter cited as Works.

[3] On the basis of diction and phrasing, Dryden classifies Troilus as an early play.

[4] "Preface to Troilus," Works, VI, 282.

[5] "Defence of the Epilogue to The Conquest of Granada," Works, IV, 236.

[6] Ibid., IV, 229.

[7] "Vindication of The Duke of Guise," Works, VII, 162-163.

[8] Works, VI, 257.

[9] "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," Works, XV, 347-348.

[10] A Short View of Tragedy as reprinted in The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (New Haven, 1956), p. 86.

[11] Ibid., p. 157.

[12] Ibid., p. 132.

[13] Ibid., p. 161.

[14] Ibid., p. 163.

[15] Ibid., p. 164.

[16] Ibid., p. 169.

[17] See above, p. 1.

[18] From a letter to Dennis, March, 1694. Works, XVIII, 117.

[19] Either Collier confused Falstaff with Polonius here, or his reference to death behind the hangings is figurative, meaning death in obscurity.

[20] London, 1699, p. 154.

[21] He had evidently read Hamlet, yet the amorality of the accident that resulted in Polonius' death did not make an impression strong enough to be remembered--or was wilfully ignored.

[22] "Some account of the Life etc. of Mr. William Shakespear" (i.e., the introduction to Rowe's edition of 1709), as reprinted in Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare, ed. D. Nichol Smith, 2nd. ed. (New York, 1962), p. 20.

[23] Ibid., p. 15.

[24] Ibid., p. 2.

[25] Ibid., p. 13.

[26] Twelfth Night. II.iv.113-118. Harrison's edition, which I have used as a modern standard, reads "She pined in thought/ And with a green and yellow melancholy/ she sat like Patience...." Either Rowe was unaware of the existence of the missing line or he deleted it as unworthy.

[27] "Some Account of the Life etc. of Mr. William Shakespear," p. 8.

[28] From Dennis' letters as reprinted in Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare, ed. D. Nichol Smith, 2nd. ed. (New York, 1962), p. 25.

[29] Ibid., pp. 27-28.

[30] Town-Talk, No. 5, January 13, 1716 (reprinted in Steele's Periodical Journalism 1714-16, ed. Rae Blanchard [Oxford, 1959], pp. 181-254).

[31] Spectator No. 22, March 26, 1711.

[32] Spectator No. 141, August 11, 1711.

[33] Tatler No. 8, April 28, 1709.

[34] Tatler No. 53, August 11, 1709.

[35] Spectator No. 42, April 18, 1711.

[36] Spectator No. 39, April 14, 1711.

[37] Spectator No. 419, July 1, 1712.

[38] Spectator No. 279, January 19, 1712.

[39] Spectator No. 592, September 10, 1714.

[40] According to H. S. Robinson in his English Spenserian Criticism in the Eighteenth Century (New York, 1932), this association is less positive if one is speaking of Gildon's earlier criticism. He refers to an essay on "Some Reflections on Mr Rymer's Short View of Tragedy, and an attempt at a Vindication of Shakespear" in Gildon's Miscellaneous Letters and Essays of 1694, which has not been available to me.

[41] The Laws of Poetry...Explained and Illustrated (London, 1721), p. 157.

[42] Critical Essays of the Eighteenth Century 1700-1725, ed. W. H. Durham (New York, 1961), p. 27.

[43] Ibid., p. 55.

[44] The Laws of Poetry..., p. 207.

[45] The Complete Art of Poetry, p. 36.

[46] The Works of William Shakespear, ed. Alexander Pope (London, 1725), I, ii.

[47] Ibid., I, iv.

[48] Ibid., I, iv.

[49] Ibid., I, vi-vii. Cf. Rowe, p. 11 above.

[50] Ibid., I, vii.

[51] Ibid., I, xxiv.

[52] Shakespeare Restored (London, 1726), p. ii.

[53] Henry V, II.iii.17-18. Theobald's full account of this is in Shakespeare Restored (London, 1726), pp. 137-138.

[54] The Restoration and Eighteenth Century, in Albert C. Baugh et. al., A Literary History of England (New York, 1948), p. 926.

[55] David Nichol Smith, in the introduction to his Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare indicates that there is strong evidence that Theobald took the advice of William Warburton (who in 1744 edited his own edition of Shakespeare) on many critical problems--particularly on the matter of Shakespeare's knowledge of the ancients as evidenced in his writings. Certain parts of the 1733 preface and an undetermined amount of textual correction seem to be Warburton's, for he held frequent correspondence with Theobald, and offered advice that Theobald was apparently happy to have and use. The preface to Theobald's 1733 edition acknowledged the debt to Warburton, but by 1740 (the date of Theobald's second edition) the two had fallen out, and the acknowledgement is absent--as are some of the sections of the preface claimed by Warburton. For Smith's commentary on the matter, see his introduction, pp. xxiii-xxiv and xli-li.

My summary of Theobald's estimate of Shakespeare includes no material from those sections of the preface claimed for Warburton.

[56] The Works of William Shakespear, ed. Lewis Theobald (London, 1733), I, xvi.

[57] Ibid., I. ii.

[58] Ibid., I, xlviii.

[59] Ibid. I, xlviii.

[60] Shakespeare and Jonson (Chicago, 1945), I, 138.

[61] Pt. 1, ed. William Van Lennep (Carbondale, 1965).

[62] Not only is the number of productions not known with certainty, but there is little or no indication as to whether the productions were adaptations or unretouched Shakespeare.

[63] Pt. 2, ed. Emmett L. Avery (Carbondale, 1960).

[64] Works, XV, 344.

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THE ESTIMATE OF SHAKESPEARE, 1660-1733

by

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English literary critics of the Restoration and early eighteenth century viewed Shakespeare as a relatively unlettered genius of their own past; in general, they loved him for his natural poetic talents, and they censured him for his errors. They have been said to condemn Shakespeare's lack of respect for the unities and decorum, his irregular diction, and his small learning; the implication is that either the critics themselves or their poetic principles suffered from a serious blindness that prevented their appreciation of Shakespeare. But this view is indeed the result of unbalanced emphasis, for investigation of the critical writings of John Dryden, Thomas Rymer, Nicholas Rowe, John Dennis, Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, Charles Gildon, Alexander Pope, and Lewis Theobald shows not only the expected criticism of Shakespeare's errors, but also delight in his successes and a respect that at times approached reverence. Of all these critics, only Thomas Rymer offered unqualified condemnation of Shakespeare's work.

This essential ambivalence toward Shakespeare is seen not only in the writings of the noted literary critics of the period, but also in the written allusions to his work by others of the actively literate population of England--of which Samuel Pepys was a member. If the critics thought that the plots of the plays were improbable and the diction often low or bombastic, they praised his thoughts for nobility and his characters for consistency and fitness of action. But this ambivalence faded when they were called upon for a final analysis; most of them seemed to believe that a Shakespeare play was in its total effect superior to those of the ancients.

It cannot be denied that the existence of the works of unruly Shakespeare posed problems for neoclassic criticism, but the critics believed that the difficulties were Shakespeare's and not their own. Their ambivalence was not so much a result of inadequate tools of criticism as what they saw as a lamentable unevenness in Shakespeare's work.

In the words of Dryden, they believed him "the very Janus of poets." To

overemphasize their condemnation of Shakepeare leaves out of account their delighted approbation of him, and as a result creates a false picture of a uniform and unperceptive attitude toward Shakespeare in the early period of Shakespearean criticism.